



BENEDICTUS DE SPINOZA (1632—1677)

# Spinoza & the Arts: Passionate Reason

*Of all the things that are not under my control, what I value most is to enter into friendship with sincere lovers of truth. For I believe that such a loving relationship affords us a serenity surpassing any other boon in the whole wide world. — Spinoza\**

## 2-DAY INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

FRIDAY 04.10.2019 + SATURDAY 05.10.2019

A child of the liberating power of the printing press, born into a new republic emerging wealthy from the 80 years war, Spinoza was an exemplary early modernist: irreverent, fiercely rational, politically daring.

**With: Moira Gatens (AU), Beth Lord (CA), Katja Diefenbach (DE), Mogens Laerke (DK), Andrea Sangiacomo (IT), Torkild Thanem (SE) moderated by Baruch Gottlieb (CA)**

Spinoza came to be the most prominent of the 'free-thinkers' a community of intellectuals which, inspired by Descartes, recently released from the oppressive theocracy of the Spanish Empire, felt entitled to subject the world anew to the full assault of human reason. The sciences, unhindered were to be released towards the full fruition of humanity's potentials. Many of us live in republics informed by the values of the young free-thinkers of The Netherlands, places where civil freedoms, of speech and of thought are promoted alongside freedom of religious belief and respect for the rule of law. The successes of the secular state in emancipating science and trade, have generated the contemporary globalised world of advanced technologies, yet paradoxically as the fruits of unhindered intellectually

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inquiry are more evident than ever, we see the seemingly irrepressible return of tribal rivalry, religious intolerance and anti-intellectual political agendas. What is missing in the tenets of the modern state which permits this recurrence? Why does Spinoza's secular reform remain incomplete?

This symposium sets as its central concern the status of intellectual freedom: thought for thought's sake, or thought for the benefit of all? We will examine to what degree freedom is contingent, also in thought, that the thought of all thinkers are not equal so that certain activities of the mind are even excluded from the status of thought. Spinoza argued, in a somewhat confucian trope, that the horizons and latitudes of individual freedom must be compromised in the interest of the maximum emancipation of the civil sphere. But even he, thinking in a republic pampered in the spoils of its colonies, was unsure whether democracy could deliver this. Now, with the Western economies facing decline we must also face an uncomfortable challenge, that our high-minded ideals of individual freedoms may indeed have merely been mainly the conceits of societies atop the global food chain. This symposium will investigate the contours of what we might mean by freedom today, freedom for whom, for what? Is it enough to merely be permitted the freedom to think, or does this imply that we may also act in accordance with our thoughts. At this time of structural crisis it may be time to reformulate the trade off between individual and civic freedom.

#### DAY 1 — FRIDAY 4 OCTOBER 2019

##### COLLOQUIUM

10:00 – 10:30 INTRODUCTIONS

10:30 – 12:00 MOIRA GATENS

12:00 – 13:30 LUNCH WITH STROLL AT

SPINOZA SPEED INCL.

VISIT TO DOMUS SPINOZA

13:30 – 15:00 TORKILD THANEM

15:00 – 15:30 STRONG COFFEE AND CAKES

15:30 – 17:00 BETH LORD

17:00 – 17:30 COFFEE, WINE, SNACKS

##### SYMPOSIUM

17:30 – 19:00 ALL SPEAKERS

#### DAY 2 — SATURDAY 5 OCTOBER 2019

##### COLLOQUIUM

10:00 – 10:30 INTRODUCTIONS

10:30 – 12:00 ANDREA SANGIACOMO

12:00 – 13:30 LUNCH WITH VISIT TO

HISTORICAL MUSEUM

OR MUSEUM MEERMANN

13:30 – 15:00 KATJA DIEFENBACH

15:00 – 15:30 STRONG COFFEE AND CAKES

15:30 – 17:00 MOGENS LAERKE

17:00 – 17:30 COFFEE, WINE, SNACKS

##### SYMPOSIUM

17:30 – 19:00 ALL SPEAKERS

## ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

**KATJA DIEFENBACH** is professor for cultural theory at the Merz Academy in Stuttgart Germany. Her work explores contemporary aesthetic theory, the reception of Spinoza and Descartes in contemporary French philosophy, concepts of materiality in political philosophy, and the theory of images before and after the pictorial turn. Her most recent book examines Spinoza in post-marxist philosophy, exploring the concept of structural materialism.

**MOIRA GATENS** is Challis Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney and Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Her work examines the feminist, emancipatory interpretations and potentials of Spinoza's philosophy and their implications for personal and collective political agency, corporality and diversity today. Gatens previously held the Spinoza Chair at the University of Amsterdam.

**MOGENS LÆRKE** is a Senior Researcher at the CNRS in France, and currently affiliated at the Maison Française d'Oxford (MFO) and at the research center IHRIM à l'École Normale Supérieure de Lyon. A specialist of early modern philosophy, Spinoza and Leibniz in particular, he has published widely examining the tensions between reason, religion and politics and censorship in the early modern period.

**BETH LORD** is Reader in Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen. She is the author of 'Spinoza's Ethics: an Edinburgh Philosophical Guide' (2010) and 'Kant and Spinozism: Transcendental Idealism

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and Immanence from Jacobi to Deleuze' (2011), and the editor of 'Spinoza Beyond Philosophy (2012)' and 'Spinoza's Philosophy of Ratio' (2018). Her recent work focuses on interdisciplinary connections between Spinoza, politics, and the arts. She recently led the AHRC-funded project 'Equalities of Wellbeing' which investigated the relevance of Spinoza's philosophies of ratio, proportion, and equality to architecture and housing design. She is currently working on a book on Spinoza and Equality.

**ANDREA SANGIACOMO** is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy at Groningen. He is the principal investigator of the ERC Starting Grant project 'The Normalization of Natural Philosophy' and former NWO-veni laureate. He has devoted significant part of his research to Spinoza. Dr. Sangiacomo's extensive publications on Spinoza include a multilingual edition of Spinoza's Complete Works.

**TORKILD THANEM** is Professor of Management & Organization Studies at Stockholm University, Sweden. Torkild's work focuses on the ethical, political and embodied aspects of organizational life, and over the past decade he has drawn on Spinozian thought to explore this in the realms of leadership, management and gender. His most recent book is 'Embodied Research Methods' (co-authored with David Knights and published by Sage in 2019).

**BARUCH GOTTLIEB** is the convener and moderator of the symposium. He is trained as a filmmaker at Concordia University Montreal, and has a doctorate in digital aesthetics from the University of Arts Berlin. From 2005-2008 he was professor of Media Art at Yonsei University Graduate School for Communication and Arts in Seoul, Korea. He is active member of the Telekommunisten, Arts & Economic Group and laboratoire de déberlinisation artist collectives. Author of 'Gratitude for Technology' (Atropos Press, 2009), 'A Political Economy of the Smallest Things' (Atropos Press, 2016), and Digital Materialism (Emerald Group Publishing, 2018) he currently lectures in philosophy of digital art at the University of Arts Berlin and in cybernetic aesthetics at the TU Cottbus.

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## SPEAKER ABSTRACTS

**KATJA DIEFENBACH**

### Is There a Politics of the Third Kind?

Spinoza's Ethics is almost entirely written in common notions. Common notions enable individuals to overcome limitations by understanding the compositions and decompositions of social processes. This production of intellectuality develops through imaginations and affects, that, in their joyful variants, do not constitute an obstacle but a resource of thought, because the affects imply social combinations of forces whose excessiveness can be rationally absorbed. Analysing the transindividual production of thought, Spinoza refuses to banish the masses from the stage of history and instead attributes to them the ability to learn to govern themselves. But the Ethics does not end with the doctrine of common notions. In a burst of speed, its final propositions take us into a third life and a third knowledge, determined by the concepts of singular essences, love without hatred and an inner joy that no longer knows ambivalences. This late layer of the Ethics, marked by aporiae, teleologies and mysticisms seems to be furthest away from materialist traditions to which Spinoza has been associated in a genealogy leading from Machiavelli to Marx. Nevertheless, (post)-structuralist authors have persistently attempted to bring ontological and political sense to the knowledge of the third kind. By comparing divergent readings, I will ask whether there can be a 'politics of the third kind' and to what degree this can be brought together with the materialist principles of Spinoza's philosophy – a theory of plural time, an attention to sad affects, an affirmation of the human capacity of self-government beyond any totalisation of history and subjectivity?

**MOIRA GATENS**

### Living on the Gallows?

In a famous correspondence with Blyenbergh, Spinoza lays out some of his most important ideas about freedom, virtue, and the problem of evil. Spinoza's metaphysics was prescient, having more in common with contemporary naturalism than the thought typical of his own time. Blyenbergh was a god-fearing man of his times and slow to grasp the point that ethics does not require the exis-

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tence of a transcendent power to reward or punish human actions. But if that is so, he worries, then why would anyone choose to act virtuously? Those of us who endorse an immanent naturalism are obliged to have a response to Blyenbergh's question — a question that perhaps looks less naïve today due to the overwhelming cynical pragmatism of our governments, our employers, maybe even our families and friends. We seem to be living in an age where knaves thrive. Spinoza's riposte to his correspondent is that if a liar or a cheat finds that he can live a more perfect life through expressing his vices then he would be foolish not to do so. But, to Spinoza, this idea is as ridiculous as if one posited an individual who, by nature, would prefer to 'live on the gallows'. What kind of perverse nature would that be? Is the contemporary world dominated by such perverse natures? Are many preferring to live on the gallows, hanging themselves in a tangled web composed by climate change denial, post-truth opportunism, and post-virtue? Spinoza's philosophy can help us to think these issues anew. Moreover, his method of passionate reason offers hope for imagining our future otherwise.

**MOGENS LÆRKE**

### **Who is Spinoza's 'best citizen'?**

In chapter 20 of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Spinoza explains that:

*If someone shows that a law is contrary to sound reason, and therefore thinks it ought to be repealed, if at the same time he submits his opinion to the judgment of the supreme power (to whom alone it belongs to make and repeal laws), and in the meantime does nothing contrary to what that law prescribes, he truly deserves well of the republic, as one of its best citizens.*

This description of the 'best citizen' is paradigmatic for the way Spinoza believes that the 'freedom of philosophizing' should be politically exercised within a democratic state. At the same time, the description bears a striking resemblance to the distinction between 'private' and 'public' use of reason — foundational for any conception of a modern public sphere — that Immanuel Kant makes in his famous essay of 1784, the *Answer to the Question*:

*What is Enlightenment?, when arguing how 'it would be very unfortunate if an officer on duty and under orders from his superiors should want to criticize the appropriateness or utility of his orders. He must obey. But as a scholar he could not rightfully be prevented from taking notice of the mistakes in the military service and from submitting his views to his public for its judgment.*

In this presentation, I want to explore who this 'best citizen' is for Spinoza, what her characteristics are, what authority she wields, how she operates within the public sphere, and how to produce her.

**BETH LORD**

### **Fear of our own power: Spinoza and the climate crisis**

In this paper I would like to explore what Spinoza can contribute to our thinking about the climate crisis, and specifically, our thinking about the emotions generated by it. For Spinoza, that which increases human action and thinking is good: on this definition, deriving energy from fossil fuels has been a very great human good over the past 400 years. We now understand our reliance on fossil fuels to be bad for our flourishing and that of other forms of life on earth. We can no longer rejoice in the consideration of collective human power: instead, we now fear its devastating predicted effects. What are the implications of this 'fear of our own power?' What confusions does this fear emerge from? And how can we correct and clarify our emotional response to the climate crisis? Spinoza's philosophy suggests that emotions of guilt, repentance, and self-hatred arise from a deep misunderstanding of our place in nature. How can our vision of the future be altered by understanding that we have not changed nature, but rather that 'we are nature changing itself?'

**ANDREA SANGIACOMO**

### **Spinoza on oppressive societies and the striving towards rational agreement**

Recent Spinoza scholarship acknowledges the importance of social life for moral and ethical development. Living in a well-organized and rational society is a necessary condition for human individuals to flourish and develop their power of acting. However, Spinoza's political science stresses that human societies are often far from being led by reason and often foster oppression and superstition. From a Spinozist perspective, society and political life are thus both necessary conditions for developing a moral life and potential threats to it. In this talk I argue that Spinoza's political theory is able to identify antidotes to oppression within the affective dynamics of oppressive societies themselves. In particular, I draw attention to the way in which the formation of dominant groups within a society also creates other groups of non-aligned individuals who have a direct interest in fostering the over-

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all rationality of the State in order to secure their own survival. The talk explores this possibility from both a theoretical and historical point of view in order to distil a Spinozist approach to the problem of oppression.

**TORKILD THANEM**

**Reason and Unreason in Contemporary Business and Management**

The performance cultures that prevail in many of today's business organizations are an odd mix of rationality and prophecy. While the optimization of profitability, sales and other business goals is routinely managed through systematic measurement, continuous feedback schemes and key performance indicators, it is difficult to imagine them without their visions, dreams and desires. Whether 'endowed with... a more vivid power of imagination' (TTP2.1) or simply a relentless thirst for power, their executives are prophets who regularly promise employees and consumers, investors and politicians that the future is wide open, that there are no limits, and that, as long as you do what it takes and give them what they need, the impossible is possible.

In this talk, I will share some examples from my fieldwork in Swedish sportswear company Björn Borg to show how prophecy and rationality may combine in contemporary business and management. Doing so, I will draw on Spinoza's work to discuss how their performance culture and its leadership nurtures, exploits and conflates joyful and sad affects in ways that enhance and diminish what people can do. Furthermore, I will ask what attracts people to such organizations and to their leaders, and what implications this may have for how people relate to leaders more broadly, in politics and government. At the end of this theological-political exercise, I will ask if a more reasonable organization of business is at all possible.

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Tickets for 2 days > incl. coffee, tea & cake

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Do you have a question? Please email us: Theo Poupalov: [theo@westdenhaag.nl](mailto:theo@westdenhaag.nl)

PROJECT IN COLLABORATION WITH: VERENIGING HET SPINOZAHUIS

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